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ABSTRACT

In 1997, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting commissioned Market Facts to conduct a survey of Americans' views of commercial activities by public television and public radio stations. The general objectives were to get an up-to-date reading of perceptions and attitudes among the general population and among groups of special interest defined by their viewing, listening, or contributing patterns, and to determine what changes have occurred since the 1995 survey. This report presents an overview of results indicating that: viewers and listeners are largely acceptant of the amount of commercial activity engaged in by public broadcasting, and contributors are even more so; the public generally approves of proposals to sell extra broadcast capacity to private-sector telecommunications providers and the sale or lease of unused channels to commercial broadcasters as ways of raising money; and the public is confused about federal funding of public broadcasting and not knowledgeable about recent changes. Enhanced sponsorship announcements, membership drives, and federal funding are discussed. Graphs present data on: awareness of enhanced sponsorship announcements; perceived increase in disruption of public television and public radio programming for membership drives; awareness that public broadcasting receives federal funding; and preferred level of federal funding. (AEF)

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Perceptions of Commercial Activities in Public Broadcasting

By Robert Bailey

ED 421 959

In 1997, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting commissioned Market Facts to conduct a survey of Americans' views of commercial activities by public television and public radio stations. Some of the activities have been put into practice; others have only been discussed or proposed. The general objectives were to get an up-to-date reading of perceptions and attitudes – among the general population and among groups of special interest defined by their viewing, listening, or contributing patterns – and to determine what changes have occurred since the Fall of 1995, when the last survey was taken. To what extent is the public aware of these activities, and how acceptant are they?

Overview of Results

Viewers and listeners are largely acceptant of the amount of commercial activity engaged in by public broadcasting, and contributors are even more so. They view these activities as appropriate and necessary ways of raising revenue. Between-program enhanced sponsorship announcements are not regarded as intrusive or as unduly long, although some worry about corporate influence over programming that enhanced sponsorship might bring. The number of viewers or listeners who perceive that commercialization of public broadcasting has accelerated does not appear to have grown in the past two years. The observed decline in awareness of sponsorship announcements *that look and sound like commercials* may mean that viewers/listeners are growing to regard them as "natural" to public TV rather than an alien form associated with commercial stations. Announcements of 30 seconds or less are tolerated by large majorities of viewers and listeners.

The public generally approves of proposals to sell extra broadcast capacity to private-sector telecommunications providers and the sale or lease of unused channels to commercial broadcasters, as ways of raising money. There is little evidence to predict a decline in contributions or audience size as a result of these fund-raising mechanisms.

The general public is even more confused about federal funding of public broadcasting than two years ago and not knowledgeable about recent changes. Relatively few are aware that local stations still receive federal funding or that the level of revenue has been reduced. However, support for funding remains strong; in fact, it has increased among contributors. Few want it eliminated.

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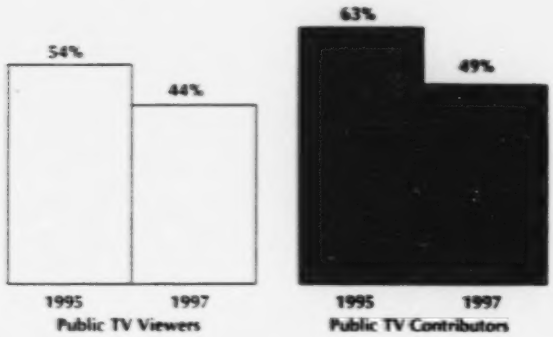
Enhanced Sponsorship Announcements

Perceptions of sponsorship announcements "...that look and sound like commercials" have declined since the previous survey, from 54% of 1995 PTV viewers who recognized that the stations they watch show them to 44% of 1997 viewers. The decline in awareness was slightly steeper for contributors to public television, from 63% to 49%.

Aware of Enhanced Sponsorship Announcements



Most (71% of the public) believe enhanced sponsorship announcements are appropriate; only one-quarter see them as *in*appropriate. Acceptance of enhanced sponsorship announcements is even more widespread among PTV contributors, by a margin of 77% (who approve) to 21%. Support for enhanced sponsorship announcements is greater for those with higher levels of education and income than their counterparts. Perceived appropriateness of enhanced sponsorship announcements has not changed noticeably since 1995.

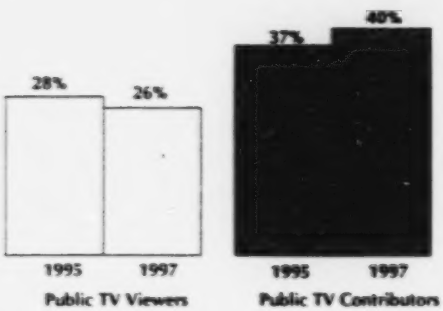
With regard to enhanced sponsorship announcements, the public also:

- is aware of the need to "...do something" to replace decreased federal funding; this is especially true of contributors;
- supports enhanced sponsorship announcements "...if they stop the increase in membership drives...";
- generally does not believe that enhanced sponsorship announcements mean unfair competition for commercial stations; contributors especially disagree;
- dispute the contention that public stations which receive government funding should not air enhanced sponsorship announcements; there was especially strong disagreement from contributors on this statement;
- is split over the argument that enhanced sponsorship announcements give corporate sponsors "...too much influence on the content of programs"; contributors do not fear this implication nearly as much as the public in general.

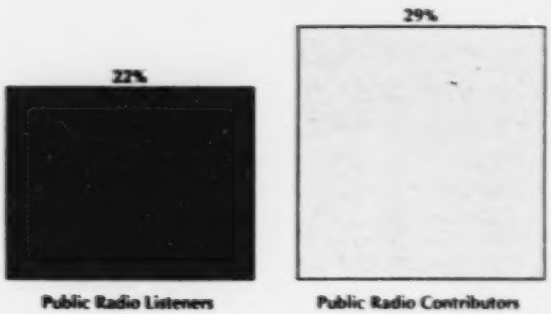
Membership Drives

Only 26% of viewers perceive that PTV membership drive activity has increased in the past few years – essentially unchanged since 1995; 22% of listeners perceive the same about public radio campaigns (not asked in the 1995 survey). Larger numbers of contributors perceive that there has been an increase in disruption of programming for pledge drives: 40% of PTV contributors believe that about television station drives and 29% of radio contributors hold that perception with regard to radio membership drives.

Perceived Increase in Disruption of the Public Television Program Lineup for Membership Drives



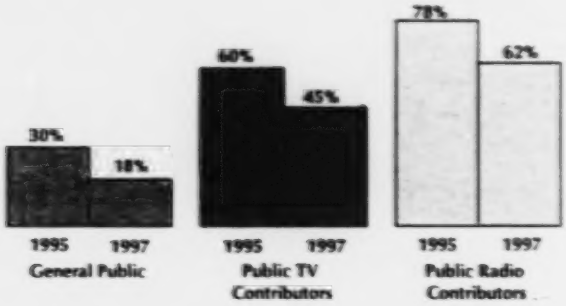
Perceived Increase in the Disruption of the Public Radio Program Lineup for Membership Drives



Federal Funding

One of the more noteworthy changes that has occurred since the last study is the decline in the number of adults – in all categories – aware that local public broadcasting stations receive federal funding. Already quite low in 1995 at 30%, the percentage of the public that knows that "any of the stations in their area get[s] any of their money from the federal government" has dropped to 18% (Two-thirds answered "not sure"). The decline holds across all segments (at different absolute levels of awareness), though the change is somewhat smaller among frequent PTV viewers. The latter segment as well as public radio listeners and contributors are much more cognizant that their local public stations currently receive federal funding. As expected, awareness also increases with greater formal education.

Know that Local Public Broadcasting Receives Federal Funding

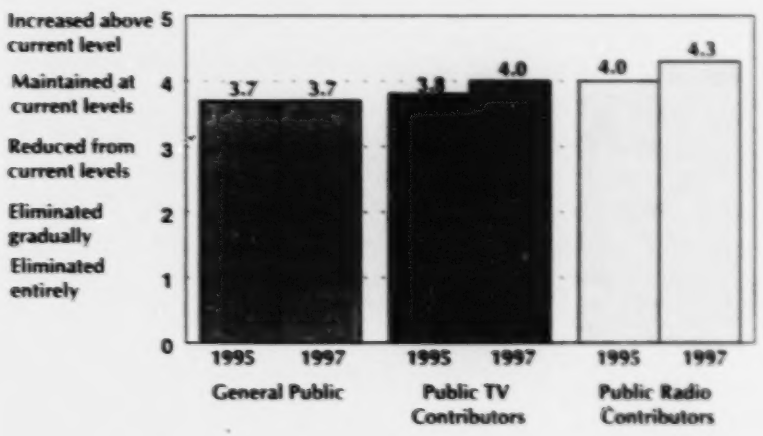


Ignorance is almost as extensive on the question of the *change* in federal funding which has occurred in the past five years: Fewer than one-quarter (24%) know that funding has declined. Once again, awareness of decreased federal funding is much greater among frequent viewers, listeners, and contributors (especially radio contributors).

Most believe federal funding should be either maintained (40%) or increased (21%); only 15% feel it should be eliminated, either immediately or gradually. Support for federal funding has not changed significantly among the general public since the previous survey. Support among contributors has *increased*.

Preferred Level of Federal Funding

(Mean score on 5-point scale)



If you have any questions about these data, please contact Robert Bailey at 202/879-9672 or rbailey@cpb.org. If you would like a copy of the complete study please visit the CPB web site at www.cpb.org. We also welcome comments and recommendations on how to make the data more useful to you.